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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/L.



Statement

The critical role of women in advancing agricultural and rural development and in ensuring food security has been widely acknowledged. Member States have committed to providing rural women with equal access to productive resources and to markets, in recognition of their agency in rural and agricultural development. Despite the progress that has been made, rural women continue to have low levels of income, sparse access to education and health services, limited job security and limited land and inheritance rights. Again and again, their needs and contributions are relegated to the margins of policy development and budgetary considerations. In addition to the entrenched patterns of discrimination, unsustainable development practices, climate change and violence against women intensify the burden placed on women and their families.

When viewed in the broader context, the situation of rural women is but one of the symptoms of a social order characterized by inequity, violence and insecurity. As such, a vision for women's empowerment must go beyond making room for women to participate in society within the present social order, as this will not suffice to end the marginalization of rural populations and the entrenched patterns of discrimination against women. The empowerment of women requires profound changes in the minds and hearts of people and in the very structures of society. It begins with the understanding that the equality of women and men is more than a desired condition, to be achieved for the common good: it is a dimension of human reality. In those aspects that make human beings human, women and men are fundamentally equal. The goal at hand, then, is not only the empowerment of women for the advancement of agriculture and rural life; it is the full engagement of women with men in the construction of a new social order. Though marginalized by present-day economic and development frameworks, women are neither victims nor simply underresourced members of society. In fact, they represent the greatest source of untapped potential in the global effort to eradicate poverty and advance collective prosperity.

How, then, can we conceive of empowerment in a way that will begin to transform the current economic order and the condition of rural women? We offer three considerations that address access to knowledge, the nature of full participation and the importance of exploring diverse economic arrangements.

First, every human being has the right to access knowledge. Yet, the patterns of knowledge generation and diffusion in the current world order divide the world into producers and users of knowledge. This has deep implications for the quality and legitimacy of education, technology, decision-making and governance. For example, despite the fact that most agricultural work in developing countries is carried out by low-income women, the primary shapers and users of agricultural technologies have been men. A key challenge is how to strengthen women's capacities to identify technological needs and to create and adapt technologies in the light of social needs and resource constraints. Reforming the present flow of knowledge — from North to South, from urban to rural, from men to women — will free development from narrowly conceived conceptions of modernization.

Second, access to knowledge promotes meaningful and informed participation in decision-making at the family, community and higher levels of social administration. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and

services in some form, its primary concern must be to build the capacity of a given population to participate in creating a better world. It is imperative, then, that the educational process associated with such capacity-building assist rural women and girls to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as the driving force of an ongoing effort to apply knowledge to improve their own material and spiritual condition and to contribute to the betterment of their communities.

Third, the increased flow of goods, services, capital and labour within existing structures and processes benefit only very few people at the expense of many. This has given rise to the impoverishment of rural communities, the exploitation of vulnerable populations — women and children in particular — and the devastation of the environment. Such economic pressures have also led to the disappearance of diversified, ecologically sustainable small-scale agriculture, mostly found in rural areas, greatly affecting women, who carry out the bulk of the work. Local economies that have historically valued collective well-being over competition and individualism have grown increasingly insecure. To note these realities is not to present a naive idea of local economies but rather to stress that diverse economic arrangements need to be given space to develop.

The present document has highlighted just three challenges that need to be addressed in the effort to empower rural women. While many more challenges remain, the Baha'i International Community hopes that exploration of these issues can further the discourse on the role of rural women in advancing their own development and that of their communities. Moreover, it is hoped that such exploration will help to link these issues to the broader aim of promoting rural women's full engagement — shoulder to shoulder with men — in the construction of a more just social order.